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Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy of age

Citation for published version:

Mrovlje, M 2016, 'Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy of age: Gender, ethics and time', *The European Legacy*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 234-236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2015.1122910>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/10848770.2015.1122910](https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2015.1122910)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

The European Legacy

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in The European Legacy on 4 January 2016, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2015.1122910>.

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Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age: Gender, Ethics and Time. By Silvia Stoller, ed. (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 244 pp. EUR 84,07.

In this compelling collection of articles, authors engage the work of arguably one of twentieth century's most original philosophers, Simone de Beauvoir, focusing on her so far largely neglected exploration of society's oppressive attitudes towards the elderly in *The Coming of Age*. While each essay offers a thoughtful rumination on the varied aspects of the treatise in its own right, they are invigorated by a shared commitment to unearthing its core insights in light of Beauvoir's broader philosophical and ethico-political orientation, both in relation to her other groundbreaking work *The Second Sex* and against the background of her unique phenomenological, existential approach to reality. Not only does the collection thus importantly contribute to Beauvoir's own aim of "breaking the silence" about the situation of the aged (1) and foreground the issues of age and ageing as important topics for feminist philosophy and political theory more generally – a challenge that, given the predominant omission of the concept and concern with age within the traditional canon of political philosophy and the fact that the continued marginalization and unjust treatment of the elderly remain largely obscured from the light of the public sphere, remains pressing. It also brings to life Beauvoir's distinct contribution to phenomenology and existential philosophy, disclosing how her richness of insight into the world of the aged offers a valuable resource for thinking the emancipatory politics of change and the possibilities for a dignified human existence in our ambiguous age.

Thematically, the collection is divided into three parts, investigating Beauvoir's reflections on the aged and ageing with respect to gender, ethics, and time. Each article is complemented by a short interpretive essay that delves into and offers critical reflection on its main tenets and concerns, thus further stimulating a mutually enriching conversation between different perspectives and issues raised by the collection.

The first part of the book examines the intersection of age and gender, pointing to how

Beauvoir's core insights into the situation of the elderly can be fruitfully illuminated and developed further if placed in dialogue with her exploration of the lived experience of women in *The Second Sex*. While drawing attention to the lack of a sustained examination of ageing with respect to sex difference in Beauvoir's treatise, Penelope Deutscher and Gail Weiss read *The Coming of Age* in parallel to *The Second Sex* to bring to light Beauvoir's insight into the oppressive structures and unequal relations of recognition, and the varied, yet interconnected ways in which they work to reduce the lives of the elderly and women to instances of habitual repetition, shirk their perspective, their range of interests, and their capacities to engage with the world and others – and thus restrain their possibilities to lead a fully human existence. At the same time, however, Deutscher for instance also reveals that, in contrast to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir's tracing of the unjust conditions for the elderly to the predominant economic relationships within society – that is, to the tendency to conceive of the value of the human in terms of exchange value or productivity – allows her to link the promise of liberation to the need, in Beauvoir's words, to “change life itself,” the need for a more thorough reconsideration of the overall framework for the understanding of what it means to be a human being and of the relationship between human and human, and between humans and world (40–1). In this spirit, the essays in the first part of the collection contribute to an understanding of how an appreciation of Beauvoir's embodied, gendered perspective can shed further light on the particular situation of the aged, yet also raise the question of the distinct character and depth of their vulnerability that, as observed in Anja Weiberg's interpretive essay, cannot be easily reduced or likened to the plight of other oppressed individuals or groups.

The second part accordingly proceeds to examine Beauvoir's analysis of the lived experience of the elderly and the way it inspires a reflection on the meaning of being human as a paramount ethical and political concern. Sonia Kruks's article, in this respect, is significant for examining how Beauvoir's insights into the “materialist” aspects of the lived experience of ageing can be illuminated if viewed as creative appropriations of Jean-Paul Sartre's investigation into the material mediations of human political existence in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. As Kruks

emphasizes, Beauvoir traces the otherness and marginalization of the elderly to their exclusion from practical activity, and the accompanying tendency to keep them captives of a given being, eliminating their scope for freedom and future projects under the material, “practico-inert” social practices and structures. Yet, echoing the insights of Helen Fielding’s article (included in the first part of the collection), Kruks also discerningly shows how Beauvoir’s focus on lived experience reinterprets Sartre’s pessimistic view of the alienating consequences of our materially constituted and conditioned freedom, pointing to her appreciation of habit as “a kind of poetry” (74, 99). While for Beauvoir the reduction of the lives of the elderly to passive repetition constitutes the main mark of their oppression, on this view, she also sees in habit the possibility for a “meaningful disclosure of the world,” of creating or reconstituting meaningful relations with the world and others in a way that also keeps open a future (99). This problematic is taken up by Debra Bergoffen, inquiring into the ethical significance of Beauvoir’s insights into the “unique experience of finitude,” the sense of a closed future, characterizing the situation of the aged (127). Interestingly, however, Bergoffen argues that, in linking the injustice suffered by the elderly to the diminished possibilities accorded them of engaging the world through future projects, Beauvoir paradoxically reinforces the view of human freedom as an ability to shape and control the future – which in turn would seem to exclude the aged from the realm of creative activity. Instead, Bergoffen turns to Beauvoir’s deep-seated recognition of the dignity of our finite, embodied condition and the ensuing contingency of the future – as espoused in her novel *All Men Are Mortal* and her *Ethics of Ambiguity* – to foreground the temporal perspective of the aged and “their marked vulnerability” as an important source of insight into the dangers of an overly-confident, domineering attitude of seeing the world as a plaything for the realization of our goals – and as such also as a worthy lens through which to reclaim the ambiguous, intersubjective reality of human freedom (138).

The ethical significance of Beauvoir’s exploration of the lived experience of old age is further examined in the third part of the collection, delving into the otherness of the elderly as a social and political phenomenon that at the same time concerns the more fundamental human

relation to and experience of time. Drawing on Beauvoir's insight into the changed structure of lived time confronting the aged, Sara Heinämaa for instance goes on to reclaim her recognition that the nearness of death nevertheless allows for the possibilities of a meaningful, trans-generational opening towards the future – yet that it is a possibility that remains predicated upon a radical change in our intersubjective, political forms of co-existence. Beata Stawarska, in turn, further expands on this challenge, pointing to the need to recognize “ambiguity in aging:” the need to acknowledge the interconnectedness of past experiences and future possibilities in every present moment and to assume responsibility for the future that is bound to always lie beyond our transparent grasp (232).

The collection thus engages Beauvoir in a fruitful dialogue with the present, both faithfully illuminating the originality of her insights and concerns, and developing them further with a view to future critical engagement. As a recurring theme in the articles, one such further avenue of inquiry emerges as particularly significant: how Beauvoir's recognition of the ambiguity of old age as at once an overwhelming given, a natural fact of human existence *and* an ethical and political phenomenon, also opens the space for thinking the promise of emancipation in terms of a broader reflection on the meaning of human freedom and responsibility as political realities that concern our essential interconnectedness with others and the world, and transcend the life-span of any individual life to reach towards past and future generations alike. It is perhaps in this light that we might understand Beauvoir's urgent appeal that the aim of furthering equal relations of recognition requires “changing life itself.” For then this aim would seem to not only involve the challenge of securing the material conditions for the elderly to be able to engage the world in freedom, but also concern the need to recognize in their particular, finite and embodied perspectives equal members of the common world and a valuable source of insight into the ambiguities of human worldly existence – thus, as Bergoffen briefly alludes, rendering their claim to rights a matter not of mere generosity, but of human dignity.

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